

Second Place

Bridget Murphy

12th Grade

Kellenberg Memorial High School, Uniondale, NY

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Zero. That is the number of interactions I had with the special needs community before my first time volunteering. That means that before I was fourteen years old, I had never engaged with anyone with special needs - not in a positive light at least. In today's society, that is a problem.

Due to my lack of exposure, the first few minutes of my volunteering at Camp ANCHOR, a camp for children and adults with special needs, were terrifying. I vividly remember walking onto the bus and not being able to find an empty seat. So, I tapped on a camper's shoulder. I suppose I caught him off guard because within seconds he was standing, yelling, and shaking. I was so shocked by his outburst that I froze. Everyone else on the bus sat there unfazed. I am sharing this story because it's important to recognize that people with special needs are different; that is why it is so crucial to understand their behavior. Looking back, the camper was totally justified for his reaction. He was hypersensitive to touch; and so, he reacted the only way he knew how.

That was my first ever real interaction with the special needs community. That's where the issue lies. Today's youth has almost no exposure to differently abled kids. Had I known that people with autism have hypersensitivities, I would not have initiated my interaction with him through physical touch. However, I didn't know that. I didn't know that because children who are "different" are treated as if they are "diseased" - almost as if their disabilities are contagious. It is natural to fear that which is different; however, it is the responsibility of those who are older and in positions of authority to encourage the younger generations to break those barriers.

The only solution to this issue is exposure. The best gift a person could give someone with autism (or any disability for that matter) is their time. Volunteering changes the way in

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which people view the autistic community for the better. This can be achieved through service hours and volunteer work. Plenty of schools throughout the country have required service hours, whether it be for National Honors Society, religious purposes, or as a graduation requirement. Therefore, schools have the potential to be a driving force for this cause. However, how many schools actually encourage kids to volunteer within the special needs community? I have not heard of any. This truth is even more disheartening considering the fact that the rate of infants born with developmental disabilities is increasing greatly, especially here in our own community; therefore, this cause cannot be ignored. If schools would suggest spending time with special needs kids to fulfill service requirements, at least some portion of today's youth would better understand and care for the special needs community. Exposure is key if we ever hope to end the ridicule and judgment of children with disabilities. Every person who respects people with special needs, helps aid this battle.